



Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty

Dorothy Roberts

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This is a no-holds-barred response to the liberal and conservative retreat from an assertive, activist, and socially transformative civil rights agenda of recent years--using a black feminist lens and the issue of the impact of recent legislation, social policy, and welfare "reform" on black women's--especially poor black women's--control over their bodies' autonomy and their freedom to bear and raise children with respect and dignity in a society whose white mainstream is determined to demonize, even criminalize their lives. It gives its readers a cogent legal and historical argument for a radically new, and socially transformative, definition of "liberty" and "equality" for the American polity from a black feminist perspective.

The author is able to combine the most innovative and radical thinking on several fronts--racial theory, feminist, and legal--to produce a work that is at once history and political treatise. By using the history of how American law--beginning with slavery--has treated the issue of the state's right to interfere with the black woman's body, the author explosively and effectively makes the case for the legal redress to the racist implications of current policy with regards to 1) access to and coercive dispensing of birth control to poor black women 2) the criminalization of parenting by poor black women who have used drugs 3) the stigmatization and devaluation of poor black mothers under the new welfare provisions, and 4) the differential access to and disproportionate spending of social resources on the new reproductive technologies used by wealthy white couples to insure genetically related offspring.

The legal redress of the racism inherent in current American law and policy in these matters, the author argues in her last chapter, demands and should lead us to adopt a new standard and definition of the liberal theory of "liberty" and "equality" based on the need for, and the positive role of government in fostering, social as well as individual justice.

Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty Details

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Jessica says

Important book. I'm just being smarmy with the recommendation: this is essential reading for anyone who wishes to clarify her or his perspective on reproductive rights.

Roberts is good: even if you're no beginner when it comes to understanding how oppression of some groups contributes in less-than-obvious ways to the oppression of others, and how the interests of some relatively privileged women have not just eclipsed but seriously undermined the interests of less-privileged others, this book will enhance your understanding of that process, as well as of gender, race, reproductive rights and yes, really, even "the meaning of liberty."

It changed my thinking. I would even go so far as to say that this book changed my life.

Dan Sharber says

similar to *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, this book uses the existing racial caste system and social dynamics of poverty to look at reproductive questions - both abortion as well as ivf and other fertility treatments. the author does a fantastic job with that. the only drawback for me was there was too much time spent discussing constitutional theory, specifically whether a liberty based view or an equality based view is better. while i suppose that is important, what is left out of the social justice framework is the empowerment of people fighting for their own rights. the book could've used a grassroots organizing component to go with its social justice framework rather than a somewhat deference to the supreme court and constitutional law.

Irene says

Its a very college level book so as a highschooler i found it hard to understand at some times. It was very straight forward and hit very interesting points that i think some people are scared to talk about. Race. It shows how black women are shown as welfare rats and have no goal or anything. I think everyone should read this. Everyone.

Kharm says

This was really an excellent book if you'd like to learn about the ways our society has consistently discriminated against Black/poor women's reproductive rights.

My problem was that it felt like she was ignoring the class issues to focus on the race issues, or she acted as if they were somehow one in the same. As if all poor people are Black. Umm, no.

Jonathan says

"A broader understanding of reproductive freedom does not reject abortion rights in favor of a right to procreate. Rather, it sees the right to terminate a pregnancy as one part of a broader right to autonomy over ones body and ones reproductive decisionmaking."

This is a thoughtful and meticulously documented treatise on reproductive freedom, which Roberts defines as distinct from conventional notions of "choice." Roberts places black women's reproductive self-determination at the center of her discussion, tying together compulsory procreation of enslaved women, the early birth control movement and its ties to eugenics, the US' involuntary sterilization programs of the early 20th century, social control of poor women via welfare, and the prosecution of pregnant drug users (crack users, to be specific). It seems like a dizzying array of topics, and Roberts defines a clear through-line. Only the section on assisted reproductive technology does not mesh, which she tacitly acknowledges.

I loved this book and it challenged me to think about familiar topics in a new light. Dorothy Roberts is brilliant and is also a clear, persuasive writer. I recommend this to anyone with interests in reproductive rights, civil rights, black feminism, and their intersection.

Chelsey says

A very important book on the history of medical abuse meted out upon women of color and how this practice, rooted in racism and the epitome of objectification, unfortunately still continues today. While Dorothy (whose other writings on bioethics I've enjoyed) lays an important outline of oppression and abuse of (mostly) black women medically, she mentions-- but doesn't much chronicle-- their resistance to these practices leaving the reader unsatisfied. Stories of resistance are just as important as stories of oppression, they force us to remember that the subject of oppression has dignity, has remained human, with an identity other than that of "victim" and is thus capable of fighting for their own rights. Otherwise, though, the book is enlightening, horrifying, and infuriating, all at the same time.

P.S: Also, perhaps she didn't wish to tread too closely upon Angela Davis' "territory" but I was surprised that she failed to mention medical abuse which goes on in prisons. This occurs in both genders, but is particularly grotesque during instances in which the prisoner is female.

Krysten says

When people try to argue that racism and/or sexism are over in America, they should be required to read this book. When they use phrases like "two-term Black president" or "men's rights" they should try to see what the fuck is actually going on in this country.

I read this book in 2006. It's stuck with me. But at the end of the day I know I experienced it from a position of white privilege and all I can be is horrified.

Ashley says

This is one of those fantastic books that is desperately in need of a revised or second edition. Roberts analysis is as insightful and powerful as ever, yet many of the examples that figure prominently in "Killing the Black Body" date from the Clinton years. While they remain useful, an updated version would extend these into the contemporary "War on Women" setting. I particularly appreciated the final chapter on the meaning of reproductive liberty v. equality.

This is an excellent book for anyone interested in the historical roots of today's reproductive justice debates. Roberts covers the legacy of slavery, early 20th century eugenics, and contemporary welfare policy. It's not an easy read, you will have your own politics and preconceptions challenged (even if you identify as proudly "pro choice") but isn't that what makes a book worth reading?

Niv says

I was first introduced to this book via excerpts that were assigned in college courses on race and reproductive health. The excerpts alone were very fascinating, but I do believe that this is a book that should be consumed in its entirety. Dorothy Roberts' argument, that Black women have long been denied reproductive autonomy (and worse, that this structural denial of reproductive justice threatens the liberty of all women and all Black people), is thoroughly researched and documented. I challenge anyone to come up with an equally researched counterargument. Dorothy Roberts scarcely makes a claim that isn't backed up with ample proof, making it quite difficult to refute her argument.

That all being said, this is not an easy read, particularly if you are a woman, but especially if you are a Black woman. This book is thorough accounting of all the ways that the U.S. (government officials, medical institutions and private citizens alike) have sought to control the reproductive lives, and subsequently the bodies of Black women. From rape and forced breeding during slavery, to eugenics, forced sterilization and the coerced use of birth control, to the denial of assistance for fertility issues, the details are stomach-churning, frightening, and angering. Roberts proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the preservation and perpetuation of white genetic lineage has taken precedence over ensuring the liberty of Black women.

This is a hefty read. At ~300 pages, with fairly small print, small margins, academic language and heavy subject matter, this isn't a book that you can read in one sitting. I took the book chapter by chapter, and each took time to reflect upon and digest. However, this is a book that is worth the effort. Though it was written in 1997, it has particular relevance in today's atmosphere of Black Lives Matter & the renewed struggle for reproductive justice.

The best part about this book, in my opinion, is that unlike many similar Sociological works, Roberts doesn't simply lay out the problem, she also provides a solution. She provides a good argument for centering race not only in feminist movements, but also in constitutional interpretations of liberty. I love a thorough read, and Dorothy Roberts more than delivered on that front. I doubt that anyone could read this book and not be convinced by Roberts' argument.

Greta says

When I first read this book it was sophomore year of College, and it was assigned for one of the most

enlightening courses offered - Prisons, Punishment, and Democracy. Recently I wanted to revisit the horrible truths revealed/explored in the texts assigned in the course. "Killing The Black Body" is certainly not a light read, but if you're looking for honest information about shocking political policies, Black history, the truth about the exploitation of Black women and the forced control of their reproduction check this book out. Perhaps the most shocking fact about this book is that a lot of the blatant reproductive genocide in the United States occurred in the 1990's. Clearly racism plays a role in part of our political policies and this is a great book to cite as evidence for it.

Leslie says

Dense and exhaustive, the case Roberts makes is rock solid. If reproductive rights for black women simply means access to birth control and abortion to you, then you are the target audience for this book.

Donald Allen says

Everyone out there should read this book. I stumbled upon this book when I was doing some research about poor black women and how the government controls their homes, bodies and who stays with them in a home.

Michelle says

Although Dorothy Roberts may have written this analysis of challenges for black women's reproductive rights in the late 1990s, it is, if anything, even more depressingly relevant today. Many white feminists get a bad rap for focusing on abortion rights to the exclusion of all else in the world of reproductive politics, and Roberts incisively highlights this by raising the issues of coercing long-acting contraception through public programs and punishments mothers on welfare receive for their stigmatized childbearing choices. Reading about the extensive historical double standards for white and black women's reproduction is a total eye-opener, even for someone with a strong interest in reproductive health and social justice issues. Although there are potentially some positive changes coming in the healthcare system, it remains to be seen whether this will help America shift from a focus on "negative" rights to a focus on "positive" rights - but if the current 'contraception debate' (ugh) in this political climate is any indication, progress might be a long time coming, especially for black women caught in the system's reproductive catch-22.

Madeleine says

absolutely essential, want to hoist upon everyone i know

Morgan Dhu says

Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty, by law professor Dorothy Roberts, was first published in 1997, but the topic it addresses, the relationship between race and concepts of

reproductive freedom, are no less fraught today than they were 20 years ago - in fact, these issues, in the era of Black Lives Matter, may be even more crucial now.

White feminism has long framed reproductive freedom as the freedom not to bear children, and advocated for access to birth control and abortion. What this fails to recognise is the ways in which reproduction for black women is a story that begins with forced rape and abduction of children during slavery, and continues through eugenicist narratives to coerced administration of birth control and forced sterilisation.

“...we need to reconsider the meaning of reproductive liberty to take into account its relationship to racial oppression. While Black women’s stories are sometimes inserted as an aside in deliberations about reproductive issues, I place them at the center of this reconstructive project. How does Black women’s experience change the current interpretation of reproductive freedom? The dominant notion of reproductive liberty is flawed in several ways. It is limited by the liberal ideals of individual autonomy and freedom from government interference; it is primarily concerned with the interests of white, middle-class women; and it is focused on the right to abortion. The full extent of many Americans’ conception of reproductive freedom is the Constitution’s protection against laws that ban abortion. I suggest an expanded and less individualistic conception of reproductive liberty that recognizes control of reproduction as a critical means of racial oppression and liberation in America. I do not deny the importance of autonomy over one’s own reproductive life, but I also recognize that reproductive policy affects the status of entire groups. Reproductive liberty must encompass more than the protection of an individual woman’s choice to end her pregnancy. It must encompass the full range of procreative activities, including the ability to bear a child, and it must acknowledge that we make reproductive decisions within a social context, including inequalities of wealth and power. Reproductive freedom is a matter of social justice, not individual choice.”

By tracing social responses to black women’s reproductive history, fertility and family choices, Roberts demonstrates the ways in which reproductive freedom has many different meanings for black women. Where white ablebodied women have in general been encouraged to have children, leading to a construction of reproductive freedom as the choice not to reproduce except on her own terms, the mass of historical and social meanings surrounding reproduction for black women leads to a far more complex formulation of what it means for them to have full autonomy over their reproduction.

Roberts begins where all narratives of black people in the Americas must begin, with the conditions of slavery. Black women were seen not only as labourers, but as the source of new slaves to add to the labour force. While systematic breeding of slaves was not common, most slaveowners were well aware of the economic benefits of black women’s fertility. Childbearing was encouraged, barrenness punished. Rape was common, both at the hands of white men, and black men chosen as mates for potentially fertile women. At the same time, black women had no rights to their children, who were legally the property of their owners. Their children might be taken from them, and sold away or rented out without any recourse. Even when their families remained intact, mothers often had little choice over the rearing of their children. As healthy slaves were required to work long hours, childrearing was often assigned to older or disabled slaves who could no longer work at hard labour.

Roberts goes on to discuss the shift in social pressures brought to bear on black women once slavery was abolished and their reproduction no longer benefits owners. The growing eugenics movement, based in a belief that a range of character traits from intelligence to moral behaviour were hereditary in nature, combined with racist constructions of black people as unintelligent, sexually promiscuous, morally lax, lazy, insubordinate, and otherwise undesirable, began to argue for limitations on reproduction among black people, as well as other “undesirable” groups. Sterilisation of both men and women in these groups, as well as limited access to prenatal and perinatal care for the poor were advocated as means of preventing the passing on of inferior genes.

“I turn to a discussion of eugenics because this way of thinking helped to shape our understanding of

reproduction and permeates the promotion of contemporary policies that regulate Black women's childbearing. Racist ideology, in turn, provided fertile soil for eugenic theories to take root and flourish. It bears remembering that in our parents' lifetime states across the country forcibly sterilized thousands of citizens thought to be genetically inferior. America's recent eugenic past should serve as a warning of the dangerous potential inherent in the notion that social problems are caused by reproduction and can be cured by population control."

However, Roberts acknowledges the complexity of black attitudes toward birth control. Many black women used various forms of birth control, from abstinence to barrier methods to post-coital douching and abortion. Over the first half of the 20th century, the birth rate among black women fell to the same levels found among white women. The ambiguities result from the mixed messages for birth control. Many white birth control advocates - and some Black advocates as well - used the language of eugenics, while most black advocates talked in terms of spacing families, improving maternal health and decreasing infant mortality. At the same time, a significant number of black voices called for blacks to resist family planning as a form of racial suicide, and indeed, to raise birth rates in order to outpace white population growth.

Roberts devotes considerable space to a discussion of the use of Norplant as a birth control method aimed at - and in some cases forced upon - poor and minority women, with particular emphasis on preventing pregnancy among unmarried teens and women on welfare. Issues ranging from unethical testing on Third World women to lack of long-term testing, to side effects, health risks and problems with implant removal, point to a 'solution' adopted without much thought for the real concerns of women, as a measure to control the reproduction of the poor, and particularly women of colour. Part of the hidden coerciveness of Norplant comes from the fact that, unlike other forms of contraception, which a woman can simply decide not to use, Norplant can only be discontinued with the intervention of a medical practitioner.

"Being able to get Norplant removed quickly and easily is critical to a user's control over reproductive decisionmaking. Yet poor and low-income women often find themselves in a predicament when they seek to have the capsules extracted. Their experience with Norplant is a telling example of how a woman's social circumstances affect her reproductive "choices." A woman whose insertion procedure was covered by Medicaid or private insurance may be uninsured at the time she decides to have the tubes removed. A woman who had the money to pay for implantation may be too broke to afford extraction. Some women have complained that they learned of the cost of removal—from \$150 to \$500—only after returning to a physician to have the implants taken out."

Other key examples of the policing of Black women's bodies and reproduction focused on in Roberts' examination of race and reproductive freedom include the prosecution and incarceration of poor, and primarily black, pregnant and post-natal drug users on charges of child abuse, child neglect, and similar crimes. She shows clearly that, despite rhetoric to the contrary, the goals here are not to protect black fetuses or to fight drug abuse, rather, that the factor driving such prosecutions is the desire to control black reproduction. She also dissects the American welfare system, showing how it is designed to penalise poor black women with children. A discussion of new reproductive technologies such as IVF observes the ways in which the costs of these technologies, and the fact that they are not covered by Medicaid or many insurance plans, make them inaccessible to Black women and families who are infertile or otherwise having difficulty in having a child.

Roberts concludes her examination of race and reproduction by examining the ways in which the liberal understanding of liberty as a defense of individual choice fails to provide true social justice and equality. Modern American law and society has focused on liberty as a protection from government intervention, and ignored the potential for equality that can come from government action. To ensure equality in the area of reproduction, as in many other areas, requires a balance between liberty and equality as guiding principles. This formulation of a positive, progressive idea of liberty:

“... includes not only the negative proscription against government coercion, but also the affirmative duty of government to protect the individual’s personhood from degradation and to facilitate the processes of choice and self-determination. This approach shifts the focus of liberty theory from state nonintervention to an affirmative guarantee of personhood and autonomy. Under this postliberal doctrine, the government is not only prohibited from penalizing welfare mothers or crack-dependent women for choosing to bear children; it is also required to provide subsistence benefits, drug treatment, and medical care. Ultimately, the state should facilitate, not block, citizens’ efforts to install more just and egalitarian economic, social, and political systems.”
